

Imperatives of Leadership: Henry at Agincourt

by Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. Callahan

In Autumn 1415, outside the small village of Agincourt in northern France, England's King Henry V arrayed his army for battle against a numerically superior French force. The English soldiers had been in France since late summer. Henry, their 27-year-old king, had led them on an invasion to reclaim the lands in northern France he felt rightly belonged to England. The English infantry had marched 200 miles in only 12 days; their numbers cut in half by disease and malnutrition.

On 25 October 1415, the feast day of Roman martyr Saint Crispian, an English force of 1,000 men-at-arms and 5,000 archers waited in the morning mist for action to begin. They were tired and wet from a fitful night's sleep on the cold, damp ground. The temperature was probably between 40 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit. They were exhausted from their forced march, and many suffered with diarrhea. Across the freshly plowed field, five times their number of French knights, including 1,000 on horseback, waited to crush them.

What could Henry, still a young man by current military standards, have said or done to motivate these exhausted soldiers to attack the French and, in fact, eventually route them? One possible answer is the King's use of the "imperatives of leadership." John Keegan outlines these imperatives in his book *The Mask of Command*.¹ Keegan also provides the best analysis of this medieval battle in his earlier book *The Face of Battle*.²

Leadership Imperatives

There is no record of exactly what Henry said to motivate his troops. We do not know his thinking, his strategy or his discussion with the other leaders who accompanied him, although a fairly detailed outline of how the battle took place is available

from a number of sources.

French troops, provoked by flights of English arrows, moved forward toward the enemy line and apparently became so tightly packed they could not effectively wield their arms. The battle soon became a slaughter. French soldiers, in heavy armor, slipped on the bodies and entrails of their countrymen and fell in heaps. The archers joined the slaughter on the French flanks, and the press of additional French troops in the rear prevented their successful retreat.

The next morning, local officials buried 6,000 French soldiers. When Henry and his troops moved north toward Calais, they were accompanied by several hundred wounded and more than 2,000 French prisoners.

William Shakespeare wrote the drama *Henry V* centuries after the battle.³ He likely had sources for information about the battle that we do not. Still, it is probable that most of the dialogue is fictional. The passage describing Henry's speech before the battle remains one of Shakespeare's most famous, and in Shakespeare's version, the elements of the "imperatives of leadership" are revealed: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. For he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother, be he ne're so vile this day shall gentle his countenance and gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not here and hold their manhoods cheap while any speak who fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day."⁴

Kinship

Kinship is the first of the imperatives essential to effective leadership—"We band of brothers." In some way, a leader can communicate with his troops that he is "one of them." For the company or battalion commander, the unit size is

such that there is opportunity to move about, getting to know many of the soldiers and allowing them to get to know him. In larger units this identification is more difficult.

In brigades, divisions and larger commands, one way a leader can identify with those he commands is through his staff and subordinate commanders. This group becomes the commander's intimates. For Henry, the group included his "generals"—the Duke of York and Lord Camoys. As Henry did, an effective leader surrounds himself with other leaders with whom he can be open and honest. They are also those from whom he can hear his soldiers' concerns and needs.

Ideally, these leaders, the "captains of the thousands," will be sufficiently soldierly to hold the respect of their own men. Respect for the higher commander and his for them should be readily perceivable by the soldiers and should give them the opportunity for identifying with the higher commander. To maintain this respect and identification, a commander should examine the trappings that come with the office—reserved parking, priority housing, no-waiting status in medical clinics—and determine whether these benefits strengthen or threaten his kinship with his soldiers.

Prescription

Every successful leader must be able to convey what he expects of his soldiers. He must be able to communicate his vision and expectations in simple terms, infused with motivational factors to inspire accomplishment: "He today who sheds his blood." English infantrymen who sat and looked across the muddy field at the superior French force knew exactly what was required of them. Henry's vision for his command was not abstract—the enemy stood between them and the

safety of their homes and families.

The significance of missions our soldiers must accomplish, both in training and during deployment, might be subtler. A mission's meaning might be lost on junior officers and enlisted soldiers. The successful leader must be able to crystallize the task into terms all can readily understand and repeat.

In *The Mask of Command*, Keegan quotes Raimondo Montecuccoli and outlines the elements of the "exhortation of the host."⁵ According to Montecuccoli, there are four ways to challenge soldiers to risk their lives. First, the commander can convince them of the importance of the battle, including the justice of their cause, the good they are accomplishing and a sense of patriotism for the country they represent. Second, he can shame them into a fear of infamy if they show themselves to be cowards and shrink before the challenge. Third, riches and fame can be promised as the rewards for participation in the fight—"Whiles any speaks who fought with us upon Saint Crispian's day." And finally, a commander can demonstrate his own confidence through a positive attitude and conviction of a victorious outcome.

Sanction

The commander has the authority to use punishment to deal with those who will not follow his orders. Henry's soldiers undoubtedly knew they might be beaten or executed if they deserted. Equally important to punishment is the positive reinforcement provided to those who faithfully obey. Shakespeare mentions two aspects of this: position and honor.

Many of the archers who joined Henry were condemned men and criminals who had chosen to serve with the King's campaign rather than go to prison or be executed. For Henry to say: "This day will gentle his countenance" was for him to promise them some improved social position as a result of their participation. He stated that the significance of the battle would raise them to the position of "gentlemen."

Military service for soldiers today can be a similar "ticket out" of generations of low social standing and underachievement, as many commissioned and noncommissioned of-

ficers can attest. An effective leader will stress the significance and rewards that participation with the unit will provide.

The second thing promised to Henry's soldiers was honor. "Gentlemen in England now abed will think themselves accursed they were not here." In fact, Shakespeare records Henry's wish that only those who hungered for honor as he did should stand and fight with him. "But if it be sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive. . . . [H]e which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart. . . . We would not die in that man's company, that fears his fellowship to die with us."⁶

Honor is not a word frequently heard today. Yet in some form, it is a frequent theme for those who write about the so-called Generation X. Many people believe this generation is in search of something to believe in and follow—something larger than themselves. Commanders can promise those they lead that they will know the honor which comes from serving others and giving themselves to something beyond the common pursuit of security and pleasure. As Charles Allen notes, "No person ever really lives until he has found something worth dying for."⁷

There is also honor that comes from doing something difficult and challenging, especially when it benefits others more than the one undertaking the effort. Of course, the challenge to commanders is to be role models their subordinates will strive to imitate. They will embrace the principles of honor they see the commander embody and will possibly adopt them as their own.

Action

The imperative of action includes not only a willingness to act but also the insight to think and visualize a situation before taking any action. This requires the commander to do the difficult job of sifting through all of the situation reports and information available on the way to making a decision.

In Shakespeare's account, on the day of the battle, Gloucester asks Bedford where the King had gone. Bedford replies, "The King himself is rode to view their battle."⁸ Henry made his own reconnaissance of the battle situation and, historically, po-

sitioned his troops based on his own knowledge of the terrain. There is no substitute for personal observation in "sizing up" a problem.

The importance of staff work cannot be overstated, especially when the volume of data available is beyond the ability of one person to process. Keegan points out that the rise of the general staff began in the 19th century when available data began to overwhelm one person's ability to assimilate and interpret all of it. Of equal importance, as a leader seeks to "see and know" the important aspects of every situation his soldiers will face, is his ability to be seen "seeing" so the troops know he is personally involved with the process of assessing the situation.

Many of this century's generals, notably those of World War I—the so-called chateau generals—have been rightly accused of ignoring this responsibility. They left a "glowing" record of the ineffectiveness of their command style. A commander owes it to his troops to avoid the tendency to command from the rear and to make decisions without information gained from thorough, personal investigation and analysis.

Example

Henry challenged his men—"He today who sheds blood with me"—to join him in the battle. Several historians record his performance in personal combat. In fact, the helmet he wore was dented by an enemy's blow. As an effective commander, he communicated to his men he was willing to share the hardships and dangers they endured.

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The trappings that accompany a senior position allow leaders to sleep in dry, warm environs even though their troops are cold and wet. But an effective leader must balance the benefits of rank against his soldiers' perception that he is unwilling to share their hardships. There is a need for a commander to conspicuously display his willingness to share every discomfort of the lowliest soldier's lot. The most effective leaders have convinced subordinates of their willingness: "We ate, then he

ate. . . . [W]e slept, then he slept."

A Commander's Legacy

Keegan's imperatives of leadership remain as examples of critical aspects of a commander's behavior. Readily apparent in Shakespeare's account of Henry's actions at Agincourt, these imperatives can be summarized as follows:

- I am with you (example).
- I am one of you (kinship).
- I have looked at the thing which we must do (action: seeing and

knowing).

- We will do it (prescription).
- Because you can do it (sanction).

NOTES

1. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).
2. Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).
3. William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 4.3, lines 60-67.
4. Ibid.
5. Keegan, *Mask*.
6. Shakespeare, 4.3, lines 28-29; 35-39.
7. Charles Allen, 1999 calendar quote taken from Robert D. Larranaga, *The Heart and Soul of Leadership* (International Bible Society, Bloomington, MN: Garborg, Heart and Home, 1984).
8. Shakespeare, 4.3, line 2.